



# Making Space for the “Irrational” Practice of Anthropology in Libraries

Donna M. Lanclos

Anodyne Anthropology, LLC

## ABSTRACT

*In this article, I extend the argument for open-ended, exploratory, anthropologically informed qualitative work in libraries that Andrew Asher and I began in 2016 with our article “Ethnographish.” I use the frame of rationality to further explore and explain the paucity of open-ended exploration in library assessment and engagement work. I argue here that open-ended, exploratory anthropological work could be the kind of irrational work that can help library workers escape the neoliberal cage of rationality. If libraries are to be institutions that do not just mitigate but actively fight marginalization and inequality, we need to deeply interrogate the structures that insist on rational approaches to libraries and library work.*

**Keywords:** anthropology · colonial practices · ethnography · irrational · qualitative research · rational · whiteness

## RÉSUMÉ

*Dans cet article, j’argumente en faveur d’un travail qualitatif ouvert, exploratoire et anthropologique dans les bibliothèques qu’Andrew Asher et moi-même avons commencé en 2016 avec notre article « Ethnographish ». J’utilise le cadre de la rationalité pour approfondir et expliquer la rareté de l’exploration ouverte dans le travail d’évaluation et d’engagement des bibliothèques. Je soutiens ici que le travail anthropologique exploratoire et ouvert pourrait être le genre de travail irrationnel qui peut aider les bibliothécaires à échapper à la cage néolibérale de la rationalité. Pour que les bibliothèques soient des établissements qui ne se contentent pas d’atténuer la marginalisation et l’inégalité, mais qui visent plutôt à les combattre activement, nous devons interroger en profondeur les structures qui insistent sur des approches rationnelles vis-à-vis des bibliothèques et de leur travail.*

**Mots-clés:** anthropologie · blanchité · ethnographie · irrationnel · pratiques coloniales · rationnel · recherche qualitative

I STARTED working as an anthropologist in academic libraries in 2009. At that point in time, anthropologically informed projects had been carried out in libraries (sometimes by anthropologists) for at least five years, such as the Rochester River Campus project studying students in New York state (Foster and Gibbons 2007) and the ERIAL project in Illinois (Asher, Duke, and Green 2010). Now, in 2020, my personal work in libraries has gone on for nearly a decade, and I am still struggling to make sense of what qualitative work in libraries means, and what if any role it has in informing and transforming practices in assessment and engagement work. When Andrew Asher and I wrote our article “Ethnographish” (Lanclos and Asher 2016), we pointed to what we called the “culture of libraries” to explain some of what we saw:

Libraries are notoriously risk averse. This default conservative approach is made worse by anxiety and defensiveness around the role of libraries and pressures to demonstrate value. Within this larger context, where the value of libraries is already under question, open-ended, exploratory ethnographic work can feel risky.

In that article, we described what we saw of qualitative assessment and other qualitative work in library contexts and characterized much of it as persistently oriented towards problem-solving, in much the same way that quantitative work is in libraries. We argued for more open-ended and exploratory qualitative projects in libraries that do not demand known problems to solve, but rather that have insight and understanding as a goal. We discussed what we saw in the landscape of user experience (UX) and ethnographically informed, “ethnographish” projects in libraries, highlighting that

when libraries have ethnography or UX teams they tend to be asked to focus on short-term projects, and can also be reluctant to share their results outside of their organization... Short-term projects also tend to have finite and concrete goals—for example, they can result in a tutorial, or a completed article reporting on the results of the project. (Lanclos and Asher 2016)

We also tried to work through what a more open-ended, exploratory, more broadly anthropological approach to qualitative projects in libraries might mean, in terms of hiring, job descriptions, and cooperative initiatives within and across libraries. We therefore made the distinction between qualitative and “ethnographish” approaches, which still tend to be pointed at specific and finite problems, and open-ended, exploratory anthropological approaches in libraries, which do not centre problem solving, but which are more broadly conceived to holistically approach and describe people’s actions, motivations, and the contexts in which those occur. It is the difference between “How do we fix the problem of printing in the library?” and “What does it look like when students conceive, write, and submit a research paper?”

Since 2016, the pattern where qualitative approaches in libraries tend to be circumscribed by UX job descriptions and problem-solving projects has not disappeared (see, for example, Priestner and Borg 2016; Priestner 2017, 2018, 2019; and articles in *Weave UX*, an open access journal for library UX professionals). Danielle Cooper (2016) noted that open-ended, exploratory qualitative projects seem a luxury to many library organizations, and she pointed to collaboration and collective work as one way to overcome the barrier of capacity, especially in smaller and more isolated libraries. Even as some open-ended exploratory projects have been successfully carried out (Asher et al. 2017; Cooper 2019; Cooper et al. 2017; Cooper and Rieger 2018; Regalado and Smale 2015a, 2015b; Smale and Regalado 2017; Tewell et al. 2017), the official structures of librarianship have prioritized a quantitative approach to library value, and it remains a struggle in many individual library organizations to get beyond a short-term return-on-investment (ROI) approach. Making the argument for qualitative work that isn't pointed at a specific problem, or framed as a luxury that there's finally enough money to do, remains a struggle.

In this article, I extend the argument for open-ended, exploratory, anthropologically informed qualitative work in libraries that I began with Andrew Asher in "Ethnographish" (Lanclos and Asher 2016). Using the frame of rationality, I further explore and explain the paucity of open-ended exploration in library assessment and engagement work. I am influenced in this approach by the work of Karen Nicholson (2015, 2016, 2019) and Nicholson, Pagowsky, and Seale (2019), who collectively lay out the case that neoliberal logics inform the current shape of library work as fragmented, time-starved, and subjected to constant demands to demonstrate a quantifiable value. I am also connecting the history of rationality in libraries with the discussions of structural whiteness in libraries, following in particular the work of David James Hudson (2017), who specifically connects whiteness in libraries to the valorization of practicality. The history and context of libraries are embedded in and emerge from structures of power that generate practices of control such as tracking and surveillance. In libraries, the specific manifestations include but are not limited to spreadsheets, time cards, and check-ins by management. These practices of control centre whiteness, middle-classness, and heterosexuality (de Jesus 2014; Ettarh 2018; Garrison 2003; Hathcock 2015; Midbon 1980; Schlesselman-Tarango 2016), and these power structures cannot be disentangled from the production of and expression of institutional values such as rationality. I then turn to the ways that anthropology as a discipline also contains a discourse of rationality and control. I connect the adoption of one particular mode of anthropological work, corporate-informed applied anthropology in library work, with the pre-existing rational problem-solving orientation of libraries, before making an argument for rejecting rationality as a way of framing value and expressing values.

I argue here that open-ended, exploratory anthropological work could be the kind of irrational work that can help both academic and public libraries escape the neoliberal cage of rationality. The insistence that competitive market principles are the ones that should shape approaches to education (and component parts of the educational system such as academic and public libraries) generally demands a rational approach to justifying the work that is done. That is, any proposed line of work in libraries, including assessment, instruction, and collections management, is subject to questions around return on investment, the potential to solve concrete problems, and contributing to the production of successful future workers (i.e., students) in the market-driven economy. Such questions and motivations leave no space for concerns around common good and social justice, meaning that libraries and library workers who bend to neoliberal logics are potentially doing harm to the academic and civic communities they are a part of. To engage in work that does not purport to solve specific problems might be seen as irrational, as it might be difficult to justify such work within an ROI economic analysis.

Work that cannot be reduced to problem-solving, and which also has the potential to transform the social relationships within which the library and its workers exist, might also be called *a-rational*—independent of the problematic dichotomy of rational/irrational, and free from the neoliberal structures that strangle the transformative potential of libraries. If libraries are to be institutions that do not just mitigate but actively fight marginalization and inequality, we need to deeply interrogate the structures that insist on rational approaches to libraries and library work. Such critical work is a prerequisite to the restructuring of inequalities and breaking down of hegemonic structures such as white supremacy.

While much of my experience in libraries has happened in academic contexts, both public and academic libraries share important commonalities, especially the struggles they encounter as public goods/services in political contexts of manufactured austerity and neoliberal logics. While many of the arguments I make in this article can apply to both public and academic library workers, the primary focus here is on practices that are visible in academic libraries.

## The Context of Libraries

Libraries and librarianship emerge from particular institutions and structures of power: whiteness (Ettarh 2018; Hathcock 2015; Hudson 2017), heterosexual gender hegemony (Schlesselman-Tarango 2016), middle-classness (Garrison 2003), and capitalism (Midbon 1980). Libraries are artifacts, are institutions, are cultural constructions that reflect and are shaped by the cultures in which they exist (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998; Lanclos 2016). As such, they are not immune to the problems

that emerge from society. Rather, they carry those very problems within their structures. In *How Institutions Think* (1986) the anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that institutions—that is, the rules and norms that govern interactions between agents (Farkas 2019; Tharp 2009)—are socially and culturally constructed, and that they themselves structure knowledge and identity.

Carnegie libraries, for example, are material representations of narratives of middle-class, white respectability, and the generosity of rich white people like Carnegie in making resources available for people who craved the rewards of respectability (Van Slyck 1995). These libraries were distributed globally, not just in the US, and were ways for Carnegie to impose his idea of what communities should have, as expressed in a particular structure of knowledge and respectability. The civic leaders who petitioned Carnegie in the late 19th and early 20th century to have these libraries built in their communities were buying into that particular kind of respectability, and wanted the power associated with it. Carnegie's intent with these public libraries was not just to shape a particular notion of a respectable community, but also to provide a context in which individuals could "better themselves"—a reflection of widely held assumptions about access to resources plus individual gumption being all that it took to be successful in the world. This was a manifestation of what is sometimes called the American Dream—a framework that ignores the importance of wealth to business success, and claims instead that all that matters to being successful is hard work. Carnegie libraries are just one example of colonizing structures, structures shot through with orientalism, white supremacy, economic liberalism, and settler colonialism.

The Carnegie narrative of respectability, generated and expressed via early 20th century capitalism, neatly contains the tension between current and historical visions of libraries and librarianship as generous and edifying, and the reality of libraries as embedded in hierarchies of class, gender, and race (Schlesselman-Tarango 2016). The history of library work in the United States (which has had an impact across North America) is one that also contains the tension between defining library work as practical and efficient and needing to be evaluated according to corporate, capitalist ideals, and library work that centres on attention to community, which should be valued for its potential to enrich (not economically) and transform. As discussed by Gregory and Higgins (2018), the focus on practicality and efficiency date back to the beginning of the American Library Association (ALA). In particular, Melvil Dewey, who was one of the founders of the ALA and of the first library school, had a profound impact on the framing of library work to the concepts and values of the business world. Dewey's conviction that scientific management techniques were core to the proper running of libraries persists. Gregory and Higgins note that this valorization of *process* over *purpose* (2018, 28) is not unique to libraries, but is certainly

characteristic of the ways they have been envisioned and managed since the late 19th century. Discourses on the value of libraries (Oakleaf 2010)—which can be usefully contrasted with the values that might inform and transform library practices (Drabinski and Walter 2016)—tend to be a response to managerial notions of ROI and expressions of value that reference economic and commodified notions, rather than generalized community-based common-good values (Nicholson, Pagowsky, and Seale 2019; Cottom 2017).

Both academic and public libraries currently exist in the US, UK, and Canada within a political context of austerity and neoliberalism (Beilin 2016; Nicholson 2015; Seale 2013). Libraries, as well as schools, public transportation, and other publicly funded services, come under threat in times of austerity, where *austerity* means political choices that allow market forces to concentrate wealth rather than redistribute the wealth for the greater good. This context informs some library organizations' choices to continue to rely on, and even intensify, quantification, counting resources and service points, itemizing processes such as teaching into instances of class delivery and attendance, and using reference transactions and patron head-counts as proxies for engagement. Such rational motivations lie behind extractive practices in libraries, such as data extraction practices such as card swipes at service points, intended to collect student participation data to justify library budgets, and sold as "student success" data, but problematically so (Robertshaw and Asher 2019). Extractive approaches can also be seen in labour practices in libraries (Drabinski, Geraci, and Shirazi 2019).

The quantification of libraries and library work, as evidenced by agendas such as ACRL's Value of Academic Libraries project (Oakleaf 2010), is in the service of a particular managerial, bureaucratic approach, not just to the work of libraries, but also to public services like schools and health care. The rationale for the existence of libraries, in this framing, is expressed in terms of return on investment, in particular measures of use (frequency, density), and in comparison to what the private sector provides with regard to tools for seeking information (e.g., Google), content (e.g., bookstores), gathering spaces (coffee shops, shopping malls), and education opportunities (private schools, for-profit education). The notion of what would be rational in current library contexts therefore is used to justify and evaluate particular kinds of work, especially that which offers to solve specific and concrete problems.

If the work of library workers is quantified and measured so that it can be evaluated, so too is the value of the library itself similarly measured, for example, in the ways academic libraries can document how they directly contribute to those advances and benefits achieved by the university as a whole. New public management techniques, commonplace since the 1980s, valorize and prioritize market forces in



assessing and keeping the public sector accountable, and act to discipline libraries and library workers. Think, for example, of the cascade of impacts in library work that framing students as *customers* has had on assessment in libraries. Library work and its impact are represented in spreadsheets, which are fed by the quantification of the work in terms of the number of interactions (with students, with faculty, with departments), units of content (books, journals, databases). It is worth remembering that the business management principles we see reflected in business practices today (in particular concern with efficiencies, division of labour into specific “tasks” that define what people are paid wages for) have their historical origins not just in Taylor’s 1911 *Principles of Scientific Management*, but also in the organizational and bureaucratic practices that emerged from and were refined in the context of plantation slavery in the United States (Rosenthal 2018, 2024): “certain kinds of management flourish when managers enjoy a high level of control over their workers. The rise of scientific management in the late nineteenth century should be seen as both a moment of innovation and as the reemergence of new circumstances of control.”

The problem-solving bent in libraries is a deeply rational one, and also one concerned with narratives of control, which we can see in the profiling and parcelling of people into the kinds of units and actionable problems that Eisenhower and Smith (2010, 310) describe here in the context of government:

This government and its apparatuses of security . . . aim to control society at the level of the population, by adjusting and intervening in social life through the analysis of norms and trends, of desires, interests, and behaviors. These analyses divide the social mass into units that are not subjects per se, but rather strata or bands of subjectivity: number of people who eat oatmeal for breakfast, who suffer from eczema, who have been convicted of shoplifting, who watch *Desperate Housewives*.

Library websites and services, for example, are often organized around personas, such as *undergraduate* or *faculty*, built around underlying assumptions about what particular categories of people are or are not likely to do when they are online in library environments. These assumptions are problematic at best—for example, in libraries that limit inter-library loan requests to graduate students and faculty, they are communicating (sometimes inadvertently) that they don’t think undergraduates do in-depth research.

The impact of neoliberalism and market-informed rationality in libraries is also evident in Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and ACRL statistics gathering, and the widespread adoption of the LibQual+® survey in the early to mid-2000s (LibQual+, n.d.). Lilburn (2017) argues that the LibQual+® survey itself shapes and is shaped by managerial approaches to assessment and libraries. The survey is primarily for the

use of administrators in reporting value and efficiency, not in facilitating the work of librarianship or relationship building. The tension between the two reflects tension in different strands of library philosophy, one practical and managerial and one (potentially) liberatory and transformative. Surveys and problem-solving are a fit for the audit culture that pervades much of education and the public sector, including libraries.

Where time is spent, and what library workers are expected to spend their time on, is also evidence of priorities and politics, not necessarily what is possible or what is necessary for the community in which a given library is embedded. Budgets are political documents, evidence of values, priorities, and where power is located. Time, under rational management practices, is experienced as something to be budgeted, quantified, and spent (Nicholson 2015, 2016, 2019; Nicholson, Pagowsky, and Seale 2019). If it is argued that there is “no time” for particular kinds of work—such as qualitative research and analysis in evaluation and assessment contexts—that is rarely true, and much more the case that such work is not a priority and therefore no time is budgeted for it.

### **Whiteness, Practicality, and Quantification**

The neoliberal logics that suffuse higher education leave little “time or space for dialogue or reflection” (Nicholson 2019, 132), dovetailing with what Hudson (2017) documents regarding whiteness and practicality, which create an environment in libraries similarly resistant to reflective moments that might lead to critique but nothing measurable or otherwise “productive.” As theorized by Hudson (2017), practicality suffuses and informs the decision making encouraged in library contexts by library leaders:

It is practicality in the popular sense of the word that is central to the library world. We organize and administer things. We develop systems and services, workflows and procedures, guides and frameworks. We identify technical problems and solutions. We emphasize efficiency, brevity, speed. (206)

Hudson points to the false dichotomy between theory and practice, stating that they are never truly separate, and that practice is always informed by some kind of analytical framework. I take Hudson to also be making an argument for work that does not necessarily fix problems or offer solutions. Such theoretical work is itself a kind of praxis: theoretically informed action that can lead to change. Hudson further points out that focusing on problem solving renders critique and reflection “impractical” and demonstrates the way it is actively discouraged in operational library work (2017, 209).



Whiteness is embedded in assumptions about what is “practical” in library work. Where critique is not possible, there can be no restructuring of inequalities, no breaking down of hegemonic structures such as white supremacy. Hudson does not argue that theory can save us, but does argue, in his analysis of the relationship of whiteness in librarianship to “practicality” that

If we are to deepen challenges to the whiteness of the field, then, it is crucial that we actively push back against imperatives to be practical, that we foster spaces that recognize the value of what is so often dismissed as “theory”—the value of questions without answers, of critique without actionable solutions, as well as the value of wrestling with difficult language and the value of exploring the historical and political contexts, limits, and complicities of languages understood to be plain. (223)

The quantification that suffuses library administration emerges from this practicality, and the implications of whiteness are fundamental to critiques of what actions quantification can lead to, such as surveillance. Surveillance, in the form of card swipes (to track attendance and participation in library events), online behaviour tracking (to track use of electronic resources), and Bluetooth detection of devices (to track physical presence in library spaces), is argued for for the sake of proving “library value.” Such practices, in these times of widespread corporate and municipal surveillance, and its accompanying oppression of marginalized and racialized people, (Gilliard 2018; Noble 2018; Benjamin 2019), serve to victimize already vulnerable communities, in academic as well as public library settings. Quantification and surveillance in rational libraries serve the needs of the organization’s desire for annual reports that can support budget requests in the zero-sum game of university funding administration. Recall Lilburn’s (2017) argument that the LibQual+® survey is much more for administrative reporting purposes than for facilitating library work or community engagement. Care for communities requires awareness of and specific attention to the needs and priorities of community members, including and especially Black people, Indigenous people, and people of colour who bear the history of surveillance for the benefit of colonial and state powers built to keep white structures and people in charge (Browne 2015, Gilliard 2019). That required care is not the same thing as surveillance, that necessary engagement is not the same thing as counting and quantification.

New public management techniques, the mechanism by which neoliberal discourses and values are operationalized in higher education, also require control of labour for increased efficiency. Control was and is achieved via tracking and surveillance, including but not limited to spreadsheets, time cards, and check-ins by management. These public management techniques also valorize the freedom of individual choice, often framed in contrast to a perceived lack of choice presented by publicly funded institutions such as schools and libraries (Cottom 2017; Nicholson,

Pagowsky, and Seale 2019, 3). The reification of individual choices and profit, justifying deregulation, cost-cutting, and privatization over the provision of common goods, is a thread that ties plantation slavery, scientific management, and new public management together. In North American contexts in particular, the history of enslaving and exploiting people cannot be disentangled from the creation of business practices, especially quantification and surveillance, that we see in library contexts today. It is therefore worth asking what values are expressed (Drabinski and Walter 2016) when libraries engage in such practices, and whether the ethical choice would be to refuse such practices (Tuck and Yang 2014; Browne 2015; Simpson 2014), making space for different ways of engaging in library work and with the communities that libraries are responsible to.

## **Anthropology and the Rational**

Before discussing the emergence of anthropological practices in libraries, I want to discuss the role that rationality has played in the history of anthropology as a discipline. The field of anthropology takes a holistic approach to researching the human experience, and its subfields attest to this holism, with archaeology detailing the human past, biological anthropology the physical condition and evolution of human biology, linguistic anthropology the expression of humans in language, and cultural anthropology the lived experience of humans in the present.

Anthropology, like librarianship, contains its own baggage of rationality and colonizing behaviour, and its history as a discipline is one that has many recurring episodes of anthropological work being used to frame groups of people as irrational, or needing mitigation, civilizing, and control (Asad 1973, 1991). For example, the Nuer people of the Nile valley encountered anthropology as one of the tools with which the British colonial government was trying to control them. E.E. Evans Pritchard was hired by the Anglo-Egyptian government because of their conflict with the Nuer, who were living in Egypt as well as South Sudan, in the 1920s (Johnson 1982). British colonial governors thought if they had more information about the people they wanted to control, they would be able to do so more effectively, and they turned to Evans-Pritchard's perceived expertise as an anthropologist. Ultimately, the government's desire for control was not met, but they tried, and anthropologists were complicit in that attempt.

We can find another example in Franz Boas (Stocking 1974), who founded the American Anthropological Association and was a champion against scientific racism in the late 19th and early 20th century. In Boas' time, the "extinction narrative" (Brantlinger 2003; Castanha 2011; Forte 2005; Leonard 2011; *Unsettling America*) shaped anthropological approaches to the study of Indigenous people in North

America, in that Indigenous people were being studied by Boas and his students at least in part because they were framed as “disappearing.” Nineteenth century anthropology and this “disappearing” narrative co-occurred with the systematic dispossession, persecution, and killing of Indigenous peoples, and in fact the extinction discourse served the purposes of colonization well, as land could be claimed from people who were defined as extinct. The cultural anthropology that continued in the 20th century, shaped by Boas and the influence of his students across anthropology in the United States, referred to “disappearing” people as if they were naturally fading, not being colonized and displaced by white settlers. This is what Eve Tuck and Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) call *replacement*—the systematic and violent substituting of white settler people for Indigenous people. Anthropology, and anthropologists, are complicit in this process when they freeze people, as did Boas’ work among Indigenous people of the Northwest Coast in North America, in a particular ethnographic present, and facilitate their erasure from any future, as well as their invisibility in the present.

In the mid-20th century, in the aftermath of the Second World War, anthropological knowledge was leveraged as a way to better understand and so (it was presumed) control the US’s conquered enemies, the Japanese. Ruth Benedict, a student of Boas, did “armchair anthropology” during WWII, and her resulting work (Benedict 1946) informed the occupation strategies by the US of Japan after the war. Benedict’s anthropological work was thus complicit in the military mission of controlling occupied Japan.

These are not the only examples of anthropological knowledge being taken by governments and other policy makers as part of their toolkits for control. In thinking about the role of rational and managerial control, the use of anthropological practices and knowledge as tools for control and oppression can be seen as setting up and enforcing another kind of rationality, one that centres white Western governments, people, and practices as the standard for rational, and sets up all other people as irrational and needing to change. The debate within anthropology over the role of the knowledge it accesses, communicates, and creates in the military, and in government, erupted strongly during the Vietnam War, and again with the US wars in Afghanistan since 2001 (Forte 2011; Price 2011; Stroeken 2011). Each of these examples points to anthropological practices, to the discipline of anthropology, as part of controlling and disciplining processes (Nader 1997). Anthropological expertise was brought in to be in service to the rational processes of colonization and control.

There is another thread in anthropological practices and the history of the discipline, and that is one where the work is engaged in to reveal and explore other modes of being. This turn from anthropologically informed institutional control to

one of understanding is illustrated in the research of Margaret Mead in Samoa and Papua New Guinea (1929, 1930). Her intentions—which contrast markedly from those of Boas and Benedict, though she was a student of both—were to make the familiar unfamiliar, as well as to make the unfamiliar familiar. She took her work among other cultures to be the key to questioning the practices of her own culture, especially with regard to sexuality, adolescence, and childrearing. She brought what she learned from other cultures back to her own, as a way of advocating for change. She used other cultural practices to feed her imagination, to provide inspiration for what else might be possible. This is anthropology as a (potentially) transformative project, but one that requires work beyond good intentions, a project that can and should be pointed at the discipline itself as much as it is at any given people or set of practices (Behar and Gordon 1996; Bonilla 2020; McClaurin 2001; Hale 2006; Tuck and Yang 2014; Simpson 2014; Strathern 1988). Such anthropology, the kind that can lead to insights but not directly solve problems, results in critiques that do not always offer concrete solutions, and can be seen as irrational when compared to the controlling and disciplining practices of anthropological practices carried out for the sake of existing Western power structures.

Exploratory anthropological perspectives provide opportunities to imagine different ways of being, and to accept more than one mode of being as reasonable, if not rational or practical in a white, colonizing, culturally constrained way (Hudson 2017). It is this potentially transformative anthropological approach that I wished to see in libraries when I started working in them and I am still puzzled not to find more of it.

## **Anthropology and Libraries**

Qualitative approaches certainly were present in library work and scholarship prior to the mid-2000s (Ogburn 2018), but much of that occurred within Library and Information Studies academic research, rather than in the context of work that was the responsibility of library staff. In the mid-2000s, explicitly anthropological approaches were brought into working library contexts (see surveys of that history in Ramsden 2016; Tewell et al. 2017; Lanclos and Asher 2016). The initial moment of importing ethnographic methods into libraries occurred with the hiring of pioneering library anthropologist Nancy Fried Foster by Susan Gibbons, then head of the library at the University of Rochester's River Campus (Foster and Gibbons 2007). This move by Gibbons was explicitly informed by the corporate use of anthropologists, visible in Rochester, NY in companies such as at Xerox and Kodak, just two of the companies that have hired social scientists to conduct customer-facing research to inform the development and production of new products and the

improvement of existing ones (additional such companies include Google, Microsoft, and Intel). In an interview (Schwartz 2012), Foster points to the two streams of her own work, one of problem solving and the other “more broadly ethnographic.” It is the first stream, problem solving, that is currently more visible in the kind of work libraries want to spend money on, in workshop participation and professional development opportunities, and also in the kinds of positions they hire for, such as UX librarians.

Participatory design approaches in libraries became widespread and particularly visible via Foster’s (2014) work studying the practices of students and faculty in the pursuit of, research, teaching, and learning. The participatory design process, one that involves various stakeholders collaborating with designers in the design process, represents just one instance of unconventional qualitative methods being used in libraries to fulfill historically conventional goals of libraries: to meet the needs of library patrons. It is not that engagement and community building are absent, but they are framed as “secondary values” (Foster 2014, 4), that is, secondary to the primary values of identifying and meeting immediate needs. The anthropology imported was not the exploratory academic model, but the industry-based model that also happened to map closely to historic library orientations towards rational, practical problem solving and customer service.

While historically, in academic contexts, anthropologically informed ethnography was about understanding and insight, applied anthropology and anthropological approaches in industry contexts are much more directly concerned with identifying and solving problems, and includes approaches such as UX and participatory design (Briody, Trotter, and Meerwarth 2013; Pink 2006; Schensul and LeCompte 2016; Sunderland and Denny 2007). So rather than ethnography in libraries providing a revolutionary and disruptive moment, it instead resulted in a moment where these methods came in to further serve the rational, problem-solving, practical, and deeply problematic institutions of libraries.

## **The Irrational Anthropological: Implications**

In our 2016 article, Asher and I were trying to understand—more than 10 years after the initial moment of the importing of anthropological techniques into academic library contexts—why there weren’t more of what we thought of as anthropological perspectives. We found ourselves surrounded not by more “library anthropologists” but increasingly by UX Librarians.

So while it is clear that libraries are providing a series of limited scope ethnographic projects and results that are certainly better than nothing, we appear stuck in this ethnographish moment and unable to move fully into embracing open-ended ethnography.

Some answers to why this is the case might be found in the structure of libraries, and additionally in the priorities of libraries, particularly around problem solving and assessment. (Lanclos and Asher 2016)

What has become increasingly clear is that the reasons for the focus on problem solving and assessment emerge directly from the managerial, corporate focus of libraries. Academic libraries are a part of a larger corporate educational project where students increasingly are “informed” rather than “formed,” as Eisenhower and Smith argue (2010, 306). What value? How much? What is the ROI? These questions emerge from the discourse of managerial power from the “disciplining forces of efficiency” (Eisenhower and Smith 2010, 313), in a direct line from scientific management to new public management or neoliberal logics. Participatory design and UX-type problem solving in libraries are ways to create accommodations in an existing rational system. Transformative practice, on the other hand, would be to design places and systems from the beginning with the sensibilities and needs of the community at the forefront of the process, in particular, the needs and sensibilities of vulnerable community members, those who do not already have power and presence. If the only people who are comfortable in and using the library are the people who already have power and are comfortable, then the library is not for everyone.

Libraries doing qualitative work that focuses primarily on problem-solving are avoiding approaches that might be potentially disruptive to power structures in favor of meeting the demands of managerial approaches that reify oppressive whiteness, gender hegemonies, and middle-class values. I don’t mean to be dismissive of any given problem, or of the need for problems to be fixed, but problem-solving is rarely the point of exploratory research such as we can find in academic anthropology. Gaining insight, creating a sense of a bigger picture, revealing context that helps with understanding, these are all things that such research can generate, but those things are not aligned with the metrics that libraries are beholden to, the quantified existence that higher education and other public entities are increasingly made to endure. The library impetus to replicate and repeat participatory design and UX projects is a form of standardization of qualitative approaches. Such standardization makes the transformative potential of anthropological work difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Library assessment that insists on card-swipes to track participation, that accesses student records to attempt to link performance to presence within library spaces and systems, is engaging in an extractive approach to research, information and people. Treating people like data sources instead of fellow humans is a symptom of managerial approaches to education and public services. Of course, extractive approaches exist in anthropology—they are a deep part of the discipline’s



history, twinned with its assists to colonialism and the control of Indigenous peoples. Archaeology is literally extractive, destroying via excavation the sites that archaeologists learn from, as are some forms of biological anthropology. That extractive and destructive mode is and has been common in cultural anthropology, and it is also not inevitable or mandatory, either in anthropology or in libraries.

Capitulating to rational is also to surrender to the tactical. Tactics are ways of acting that cannot change the structures in which they occur. Strategy, on the other hand, emerges from a position of power, and those who can be strategic are capable of changing structures within institutions and organizations (De Certeau 1984). Libraries, in engaging in irrational qualitative work, or even refusing the frame of rational altogether as a way of defining valuable work, might gain access to strategic agency, one that incorporates long-term vision and also the power necessary to break and reshape structures that do not serve them or their community (see Gullikson (2020) for her discussion of UX library worker struggles to be involved in strategy work in their organizations).

The things Andrew Asher and I asked for in 2016 are still relevant today: we called for long-term, ongoing, exploratory work, a comparative approach across different locations, and collaboration. Open-ended exploratory work can be an act of care, and a way to recognize and value multiple ways of being in and conceiving of libraries. Ethnographic practices are not the only way, and there is a persistent need to be careful to avoid the controlling processes of colonizing and controlling anthropological practices. We were (and I am now) arguing for engagement through ethnography, for increasing understanding and insight that can lead to recognizing and truly valuing what is present and important to the larger community to which a library is responsible: students, staff, faculty, and the public.

Collaborative, exploratory work is happening in libraries and is being led and facilitated by people with anthropology degrees. For example, Smale and Regalado continue to research and report on student lives in New York City and how their complexity (economic, personal, logistical) impacts on the students' study habits and outcomes (Regalado and Smale 2015a, 2015b; Smale and Regalado 2017). Tewell et al. (2017) carried out a project exploring research practices of undergraduate students with the approval of a Dean of Libraries with an anthropology degree. Danielle Cooper (also with an anthropology degree) at Ithaca S+R has engaged in a series of interview-based exploratory projects investigating the research practices of academics in specific disciplines (Cooper 2019; Cooper et al. 2017; Cooper and Rieger 2018). The Day in the Life study (Asher et al. 2017) was pitched as broadly exploratory, without particular questions beyond "What is student everyday life like at universities in the United States?" Each of these projects had direct involvement by people with anthropological backgrounds and who had the training and experience

to trust open-ended approaches. Each of these projects was also collaborative, either within an institution or across them.

While none of these projects set out to solve specific problems, they provided insights into student lives, faculty practices and priorities, and the nature of the relationship between universities and their municipal contexts that are serving as the basis for future work. The next challenge for work like this, once it is carried out, is how to get that work and its results to be used in institutional decision-making processes (Gullikson 2020). I am not arguing against working towards accommodation and fixing problems, but I do suggest that it will never be enough. What needs to be interrogated is the status quo, and the material for doing so can be in the already existing values and practices of the communities that surround libraries now. In considering what might be done beyond surveys in libraries, Lilburn (2017, 105) suggests that “other methods of assessment might provide information that is more helpful and more meaningful to the work of librarians and to the advancement of the library as an academic unit devoted not to customers, but to students, scholars, researchers, and citizens.” Lilburn does not suggest which kinds of assessment work might provide this, but I am happy to suggest open-ended anthropological work as one kind. I want to contrast the “understanding people to control them” extractive and colonizing anthropological heritage from the “understanding people to connect with them” approach that I think should actually be the goal. Understanding the difference is crucial—otherwise we might continue to have the colonizing library. No matter how much librarians feel they lack power, they have much more power than the people who are using their library, and there is a responsibility to be careful with that power. In the long history of colonialism and anthropology, there is a thread of interrogating people’s practices without valuing them, and for the purposes of control. We should rather be engaging with communities through exploration aimed at generating big picture insights, not just endless problem solving and repetitive projects.

Anthropological fieldwork can’t help you if you’re still only interested in telling the library’s story. Anthropology among students, faculty, and community members should not be engaged in to manipulate them do to library-style things, or even to be in the library, if that isn’t what serves them. Rather, open-ended research can help inform the ways that library workers can and should more effectively shift their practices, build relationships, and listen to their communities. Anthropological approaches that don’t have particular problems to solve can be a way of finding out the stories of the people the library is responsible to, whether they are in the building, using library resources, or not. Approaching libraries and their work

anthropologically invites you to de-centre yourself, your perspectives, your biases, and take on the priorities and perspectives of the people you need to learn from.

## Conclusion

It is unreasonable and unethical to cling to notions of rationality in discussing the value of libraries. If what is desired is the persistence of libraries, and the work of the people within them, there has to be more than just rationalization. This is painfully visible in the way that rational concerns about the work of libraries are emerging during the current (as I am writing this article) COVID-19 pandemic, when library workers have been forced to continue to work in buildings, even while their local authorities have issued Stay At Home orders for non-essential workers (Moynihan 2020). In this particular public health crisis, classifying library work in physical collections as *essential* treats the people doing the work as disposable. If rational practices do not actually serve library workers, or their communities, if problem-solving and tactical practices do not effectively demonstrate the value of libraries, or result in care, or engagement, what could happen if the other less rational possibilities of ethnography were chosen? What could happen if the frame of rationality was refused altogether?

The refusal to capitulate to the rational in libraries, the rejection of quantification, pigeonholing, surveillance, and tracking can look like qualitative research engagement, in particular the open-ended anthropological work I am arguing for here. Such work can strengthen existing relationships, and build new opportunities for engagement with the people from whom we want to learn, and with whom we want to work.

Shifting to an irrational or even a-rational ethnographic approach would do more than make it possible for libraries and library workers to be strategic, but could also create space for students and faculty to be strategic, to exercise power and agency in a context that increasingly wants to remove that and put people at the mercy of algorithms. Exploratory ethnographic approaches, engaging with people as people (not as data points), gives us not just more access to the whys and hows of what they are doing, but can work to connect us with them, to build relationships, so that we don't have to wonder "Why are they doing that?" Libraries also won't have to rely just on the number of transactions they have with community members to "prove value," because they will have built relationships based on valuing the needs and motivations of their community members, especially the most vulnerable. From that strong position, embedded in webs of human connection, libraries and library workers won't have to listen anymore to people who rely on machines and their broken proxies for human behaviour and motivations.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Donna Lanclos is an independent scholar and consulting anthropologist who works in libraries and other higher education contexts.

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